THE

BIBLIOTHECA SACRA

ARTICLE I.

THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF CHRIST THE KEY TO CHRISTIANITY.

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NEVER were the truths of our holy religion subject to such searching criticism as to-day. This is no occasion for fear, but for congratulation, provided only the searching be done by men of vision. Well has it been said, that "the menace of our times is the critic with no faith and with no sense of the fundamental questions of faith." "The navigator is not an astronomer: his first concern is to sail by the heavens, not to make a map of them." Many men are attempting to be astronomers, who are fitted only to be navigators. "The critic of an experience must be its expert." The key to Christ's life is not found in the laboratory, but in the Holy of Holies. Not what we think of Christ, but what he thinks of himself, must be the key to our knowledge. The consciousness of Christians must rest upon and be enlightened by the consciousness of Jesus. "In his light we see light."

What then were the fundamental facts in the consciousness of Jesus? What was his view of himself? Of his many claims to the supernatural, we may mention five: preëxistence, infallibility, sinlessness, supernatural power, and capacity, as Son, to reveal God.

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1. *Preëxistence.*—This stupendous claim lifts Christ out of the category of ordinary men. He said, "Before Abraham was, I am"; "I came down from heaven"; "I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me." No other human being could ever say this. We are not conscious of preëxistence. The claim of Jesus is possible on the basis of the truth of the historic story of the Nativity and Incarnation. The method of the Nativity, so unhesitatingly affirmed by St. Matthew and St. Luke, is possible only on the basis of a preëxistent personality. The incarnation of such a preëxistent person, not only explains, but necessitates, a supernatural generation. Add sinlessness to preëxistence, and this product from ordinary generation would be a greater miracle than the supernatural conception of Mary. "Jesus Christ was a new departure in human life." "We inevitably associate with the ordinary process of generation the production of a new personality." But Jesus was not a new personality,—else his claim to preëxistence was the wildest fancy or the most stupendous fraud.

Paul penetrated the mystery of the manger cradle when he drew the distinction between the first and second Adam. The one was of the earth, earthy; the other, the Lord from heaven. The former was a living soul; the latter, a life-giving spirit. The birth of Jesus must, in some way, be the regeneration of humanity. We cannot fathom the mystery of the process, but we can know that the creative Spirit who made a sinless humanity possible in Jesus, makes spiritual regeneration possible in all who believe in him. To put sole emphasis on the physical side of Christ's supernatural birth is to miss the purpose and meaning of the incarnation. It takes the redemptive truth, inherent in that mighty and mystic event, and drags it in the mire of a gross materialism.

That a fatal error has been made at the fountain of Christianity, and perpetuated through nineteen centuries, is inconceivable on the theory that the Holy Spirit is regnant in the church. So interwoven are these fundamental doctrines, that Canon Gore says: "There are no believers in the Incarnation discoverable, who are not also believers in the Virgin Birth," and we might add, in Christ's preëxistence as conditioning both. What is needed in the church to-day is a sense keen enough to see the rationale of the Incarnation, the spiritual necessity of such a human birth as the first and third Gospels declare to have taken place. To admit doubt as to the reliability of these narratives would be "to strike a mortal blow at the authority of the Christian church as a guide to religious truth in any real sense." Certainly no thoughtful person would take seriously any portion of the writings that, at the outset, entered the Holy of Holies, and profaned the sanctities of a divine revelation with a lie.

2. *Infallibility.*—Jesus, in the consciousness of a divine prerogative, placed himself above the law, as a higher authority and a more accurate interpreter and revealer of God. He passed judgment on all the traditions of history and customs of religion, and changed or displaced them at will. Though conditioned by a human nature and acknowledging the limitations essential to a true humanity, he never acknowledged any limitation in the realm of spiritual truth. He made himself the teacher of mankind in this higher sphere, and said that all character and conduct must be judged by his words. This would be blasphemous egotism, were it not the sane and confident utterance of one so conscious of his spiritual illumination and mission that he could say, "I am the light of the world."

3. *Sinlessness.*—Jesus claimed this as a man. His claim is inconsistent with humanity in any other representative of the

race. No other, in the rational use of his power, has ever been able to say, "Who convinceth me of sin?" To say this would be our greatest sin. No affront to Deity is so offensive as to affirm no need, and acknowledge no sin. What would be blasphemy in us savors of no inconsistency as it comes from the lips of Jesus. Logic limps when it meets such a problem as this. Material science has no method of dealing with such an exceptional fact. Its falsity or truth must be discovered in some more subtle and accurate way. The mystery here is involved with the mystery of Jesus' origin. We have not yet mastered the relation of spirit to matter; much less the relation of the eternal and creative Spirit to human personality in Christ or in ourselves. Physical science is staggering before mysteries as great in the material universe. "Nothing can be more inconceivable than the properties of ether which physicists find themselves obliged to postulate to explain the phenomena of light. How the ether can at the same time behave like an electric solid in resisting the gliding of one portion over another, and yet like a fluid in letting bodies freely pass through it, is a mystery, which we do not understand. Nevertheless we are obliged to suppose that so it is." If the action of light compels scientists to make all theories bow to the supremacy of fact, the spiritual phenomena of Christ's life, and the mystic and beneficent power of his influence through the passing centuries, must compel all theories concerning him to be consistent with these visible and universally recognized facts. It is possible to study the incarnation, investigate miracles, apply our science to the supernatural, and not come within seeing distance of the real problem; for our final answer must solve the mystery of Christ's life-giving power. He does what we should expect a heaven-sent religion to do. Wherever he has gone he has left the touch of God on human lives. This is the

fact we have to reckon with. This supernatural phenomenon must be the polar star that guides us in our study of his mystic career.

4. *Supernatural power.*—Jesus was conscious of its possession. He walked on the sea, stilled the tempest, quieted the wind, banished disease at a word, fed five thousand with food sufficient for only five, raised the dead, and reincarnated his own body when death had demonstrated its mortality. He did all this in his humanity. Our science has not yet answered the ancient question "What is man?"—nor defined the original sovereignty bestowed upon him in the creative purpose. The writer to the Hebrews says we do not yet see all things put under him; but we see Jesus, crowned with glory and honor, and representing in his holy humanity the rightful power and sovereignty of a sinless man. Who knows but that, in a holy universe, man's natural right is to walk on water and hold nature subject to his control?

The statements of Christ regarding himself must be taken at their face value, and the statements of the inspired record. They cannot be disproved. They may be proved. "The logical impossibility of proving a negative is proverbial." "On a subject whose conditions are unknown to us the very attempt to do so is ridiculous." In the realm of practical life the demonstrations of Christianity are all within our reach. No theories or conclusions concerning the insolvable problems of Christ's personality must for one moment be tolerated that hinder faith in these vital verities. The beneficent influence of Christianity must never be imperilled by negations incapable of proof.

5. Jesus was conscious of *capacity to represent and reveal God.* He did not hesitate to put himself in the same category with the Father, and say that eternal life consisted in knowing

him as well as in knowing the Father. This was nothing less than an essential claim to Deity. He assumed to be the only interpreter of God, and the only door of access to knowledge of, or communion with, him. He declared that life was his gift; that his cross and resurrection were essential factors in God's program of redemption; and that through him, and only through him, was salvation to become an accomplished fact in human experience. It is evident that these claims bring us face to face with problems we meet nowhere else. They cannot be waved aside with denial. They must be demonstrated from the inside, or left alone. The consciousness of Christ must be the key that unlocks the mystery of his life, and penetrates the mystery of our own. The verities or falsities of the historic record can be demonstrated only by a spiritual intelligence mature enough to detect the fundamental truth or error. To reduce Christianity to a naturalistic basis is to reduce it to a fraud. Its supernatural elements have never seemed inconsistent with its spiritual integrity; on the other hand, its spiritual influence has been so extraordinary as to demand a supernatural origin and history. Paul, without the caution of a single reservation, staked everything on the verities of the physical resurrection of Jesus. The modern age has no occasion to be more cautious than he. Our prudence may be only another name for loss of vision. To measure Christianity by our experience is to degrade it. To measure Christ's temptations and tendencies by our own may be little less than blasphemy. His perfect humanity, with its susceptibility to all human temptations, does not mean that he was under the sway of the grosser passions. Carnality is not dominant in great souls. Sainthood, even in us, is not compatible with surrender to the flesh. He who cannot conceive of the divine Master as living on the heights and in crystal atmosphere knows little of the

soul's altitudes and sublimities. He who loved the world to the point of death, whose supreme passion was passion for souls, whose sacrifice was so absolute as to include Calvary, cannot be conceived of by a pure soul as grovelling in fleshly desire. His temptations were infinitely more subtle and intense, because so sublime. I suspect that capacity to be tempted does not increase as we tend toward the slums, but as we rise toward the blue ether. Divinity does not consist in deliverance from such capacity, but in its perfect control. The extinction of evil desire is not the extinction of human nature, but its sanctification by the indwelling Spirit of God.

From the foregoing we conclude that critical scholarship must ever adjust itself consistently to the sovereign consciousness of Jesus; to the beneficent influence of the gospel history as traditionally believed; to the spiritual motive that inspired its authority, and to the spiritual results that universally flow from its vital acceptance.

The whole aim of Christianity is redemptive. The New Testament has been the means by which the gospel story and the redeeming life have been communicated to the world. Like the cross it proclaims, it has been the power of God unto salvation to countless multitudes through nineteen centuries. We have a right to demand that a critic of the New Testament shall have the same redemptive purpose, and shall start from the vantage-ground of a redemptive experience. If a scientist cannot analyze light without destroying its power, we may well insist that he leave its beneficent mysteries alone. Every step in true science must be contributory and constructive. The highest scholarship subjects itself to the suspicion of a subtle inaccuracy, unless it conducts its investigations on bended knee. "In order to be a great spiritual thinker, one must have a great spiritual life." The problems of Christianity are

not to be solved by the processes of natural science. They are in another category altogether. The specialist in physics cannot take his tools into the realms of psychics. The deeper and truer things in life are not discovered by the microscope or scalpel. I do not care for a dissecting knife when I hear the song of a bluebird or robin. The song tells the story of its birthplace in the bosom of God without analysis. I do not care for the test-tube of the chemist when I catch the beauty or fragrance of a rose. If the beauty is not self-revealing, and the fragrance its own interpreter, demonstration is impossible.

Intuition is the key to knowledge in Christianity. It has to do with life, with spirit, with the subtle and invisible laws of the soul. The first requirement in a critic of the New Testament revelation is spiritual vision. As in the science of life, so in the science of criticism, "Christianity distinctly declines to be proved first, and practiced afterwards. Its proof and practice go hand in hand. Its real evidence is its power."

All study of the supernatural problems of Christ's life must be conducted in the light of this principle. Back of the manger at Bethlehem, and the miracles, and the resurrection, is the personality about whom the wonders are told. Is personality the key to the wonders, or must the wonders be explained before there can be allegiance to the person? We no longer prove Christianity by miracles, but miracles by Christianity. The greatness of the one carries with it the reasonableness of the other.

A group of rustics passed through the Fine Arts Building at the St. Louis exposition, gazing vacantly at the masterpieces that glorified its walls. A clergyman, widely known for his scholarship and culture, stood before one of the paintings, taking notes. "Be you writing about those things?" one of the rustics asked. "Yes," answered the man of vision, and pro-

ceeded to unfold the thought, skill, and purpose of the artist. As he interpreted the wondrous production, there dawned upon the simple folk the vision of a world of art and beauty of which they had never dreamed.

We are, at the best, simple-folk, rustics, in interpreting the person of the divine Master. What we need, in the presence of a great painting, is not an opera-glass, but a soul. And what we need, in the presence of Christ, is reverent humility, and capacity to see. "Work done by the intelligence alone," says Dr. George A. Gordon, "can never compass the secret of Christian history. Jesus has been so much to mankind that any scholar with ordinary historic imagination and common intellectual decency must uncover in his presence. It is but homage to reality to confess the transcendent greatness of Jesus, and to study him in any other mood is sheer impertinence." "Christ has always meant most to the greatest souls." In view of his beneficent influence, negative criticism becomes impious. It is easy to lose the key to Christ's personality and career. It is easy not to be spiritual. It is still easier not to know that one is not spiritual. Unitarianism has no Bethlehem or Pentecost. "No man can say that Jesus is Lord but in the Holy Spirit." It is significant that the trend of modern criticism is synchronous with loss of spiritual power in the church. A defect in an argument may sometimes be discovered by its effect. Confidence in the literal story of the Gospels, accompanied by vital application of its truth, has without exception had regenerating power in the life of individuals and nations. A philosophy that imperils or devitalizes the religious life of two continents does not bear the impress of divine inspiration. It is easy for the intellect to commit sacrilege without knowing it.

We do not imply that the science of biblical criticism is

wholly destructive in tendency or effect. But so eager is the questioning spirit of the age, and so regardless of consequences, that destructive conclusions have had disproportionate emphasis. Those uninitiated in the science and uncertainties of criticism, and those not deeply grounded in religious experience, have been thrown into mental confusion, and unsettled in their faith. This is one of the inevitable effects of the initial and immature stages of a questioning process. It is temporary. Later scholarship will place many of the conclusions and extravagances of modern criticism among its curiosities. The verities of the spiritual life carry with them securely many things that a ruthless skepticism challenges. "The spiritual wisdom of the race cannot remain in the air." Some things to-day are beyond the era of experiment. Among these is the religion of Calvary and Pentecost. The vitalities of Christian experience can be doubted only by those who lack them. It is not too much to say that this experience is conscious of the supernatural. It is not genuine if it can find an explanation of its origin and vitalities in a natural process or cause. To attempt to eliminate the supernatural from Christianity is to attempt more than can be done in one's own regenerate life. The naturalistic argument will never displace the Virgin Birth of Jesus, nor his miracles and resurrection, because it can never displace the supernatural in Christ's person and career. Eliminate this, and Christianity, as a revelation and program of redemption, disappears. A system of ethics would remain, but no help for man in his effort to apply it.